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ABRIDGED VERSION

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BRIEF TO THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION, RECREATION AND SPORTS

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ABRIDGED VERSION

Special School Projects In Secondary Education: Diversifying Equitably

The present Brief provides a practical perspective on the subject of diversifying learning in secondary education. While the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation is of the opinion that establishing special school projects in all secondary schools—public and private—is positive in general, it deems, however, that there is a potential risk of disparity. Therefore, the Conseil believes that there is a need to regulate the offer of special school projects in order to avoid inequality among students, schools and the entire education system.

INTRODUCTION

One of the prevailing characteristics of secondary education is its heterogeneity: students from different backgrounds, with a range of skills and interests who require a diversified education. There are many ways to meet the needs of this diverse clientele, for example by providing an education based on elective subjects, special school projects or programs. This is also possible through teaching methods and approaches that take into account learning strategies, patterns and styles, or target programs such as *Agir autrement* and student orientation, to name a few. Other means available to manage this heterogeneity include class levels, student selection, and temporary or permanent grouping of students such as individualized learning paths.

All these practices aiming to address the gamut of student profiles and needs, correspond, in the present Brief, to the diversification of learning in secondary education. It is important to make a distinction between *diversifying* and *differentiating*, which the Conseil reserves for the professional practices of differentiated learning promoted within the education reform.

The Conseil was primarily concerned with the diversification of special school projects, for in Quebec the preferred strategy by all education players has mainly taken the form of special school projects applicable to a given group of students, particularly in urban areas. While fully acknowledging the value that these projects represent and that they are a valid response to the diversified learning needs of students in secondary education, the Conseil questioned what is the most viable means of meeting the needs of *all* students.

To the Conseil, this question appeared all the more pressing as secondary schools have, as of Fall 2005, begun implementing the education reform, investing in a range of educational measures to meet the educational needs of all students and to ensure success for a greater number of them. Is it possible to offer special school projects without student selection? Can these projects be reconciled with the pedagogical measures of the education reform? For whom are these projects established in secondary schools and why? Are we witnessing a revival of special education, general academic and enriched programs and the disappearance of classroom heterogeneity? In short, from the outset of its considerations, the Conseil has been concerned with the question of reconciling the objectives of diversifying learning with the goals of "success for all" promoted within the education reform.

Moreover, within the framework of decentralization that has characterized the Quebec education system since the education reform, there are now new local responsibilities in the area of diversifying learning. Governing boards, schools and school boards and private schools have thus adopted new powers with regard to subject-time allocation, establishing special school projects (whether selective or not), admission criteria, and so forth. These new local responsibilities require considerable understanding and should be based on principles and values recognized by the entire education community to be implemented with full transparency.

In addition, Conseil examined the effects of diversification on the entire education system, and in particular on the future of secondary schools. What does the future hold for public and general secondary education? Is heterogeneity disappearing from secondary school classrooms? Do public and private secondary schools carry out competing or complementary missions? In the context of this Brief, both public and private schools are invited to reflect on the ideals of democracy and the objectives of equal opportunity that have guided the education system over the past four decades.

THE OFFER OF AND DEMAND FOR SPECIAL SCHOOL PROJECTS IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

Why has Quebec invested in special school projects as a means of diversifying learning? Do these projects maintain links with the heterogeneous nature of Quebec's secondary education clientele?

The Disappearance of Learning Paths

The massification of secondary schools, which is the result of greater accessibility to education, has led to an increased and varied need for education. At the beginning of the 1960s and following the Parent reform, managing diversity and heterogeneity in comprehensive secondary schools was structured around programs—Sciences, Arts, Commerce or Vocational Training—and education was organized along three learning paths: special, general or enriched.

In the late 1970s, in the wake of *The Green Paper On Primary and Secondary Education in Quebec* (Ministere de l'Education, 1977) and *Schools of Quebec: Policy Statement and Plan of Action* (Ministere de l'Education, 1979, known as the "Orange Paper"), the organization of education along learning paths was abolished, without, however, proposing any alternatives or equipping teachers to manage the heterogeneity of students. The curriculum for secondary education had thus essentially remained uniform. The subjects taught were the same for all students and the range of needs was addressed through optional subjects at the secondary level and/or through vocational training. As for students with "difficulties," they were mainstreamed in classrooms in order to provide them with as normal a school environment as possible.

Could it be then that learning paths may be resurfacing outside the regular classroom (as special needs, gifted education or special school projects applicable to a group of students) — due primarily to a lack of appropriate support for teachers to manage this heterogeneity?

Which Demands Do Special School Projects Meet?

The reasons behind the offer of special school projects are not without correlation to an overly uniform offer of education and the disappearance of learning paths. In essence, these projects tend to fill voids in the curriculum and meet new expectations among some players.

- ***Revitalizing a Seemingly Ordinary and Dull Public School***

During the 1970s and 1980s, the image of public secondary schools was predominantly based on the poor reputation of comprehensive secondary schools. To this was added the challenge of reconciling a general secondary education with an ever-increasing heterogeneous school population. Mass education, then, was still a new reality in Quebec.

By the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, a number of initiatives were launched to revitalize a sagging public and general secondary education. Despite this new campaign, the lure of private education and dropout rates continued to increase.

The end of the 1990s witnessed the emergence of local powers, in light of the education reform and amendments to the Education Act. In addition to recognizing the school as the foundation best suited to meet the needs of the community, the legislation introduced flexible regulations governing parents' freedom to choose the type of education for their children.

This new local autonomy was particularly manifested in diversifying the offer of education. Indeed, there seems to have been a reversal of rationale, from one entirely influenced by the offer of education to one primarily guided by the demands of parents and the middle class. And this demand was firmly in favour of selective special school projects.

- ***Replacing and Enriching a Seemingly Uniform and Lacklustre Curriculum***

In the late 1980s, a category of special school projects was established to supplement a curriculum that was perceived to be too lax and undemanding, a curriculum that did not sufficiently leverage students' higher skills. Criticism of the "pre-reform" curriculum was not entirely unfounded and indeed explains why secondary schools were interested in programs such as international studies programs. The Conseil has, however, emphasized since then that the curricular reform and revision of programs of studies currently being implemented in secondary education are likely to rectify the situation by thoroughly revising the offer of education for all students.

For the Conseil, the education reform is a long-term undertaking. Its implementation is challenging and requires prudence. However, the Conseil must reiterate that the new curriculum be given time to be fully implemented before bearing results.

- ***Competing With the Private Sector***

The increasing popularity of private schools as a choice for secondary education has, in the past two decades, led to a considerable exodus of clients from the public sector. Consequently, and despite the implementation of the education reform, the popularity of private education has not ceased its upward climb over the past decade.

To counter this exodus, public school boards and schools have proactively opted to compete with private schools on their own territory by offering selective special school projects for better retention of top academic performers as well as selective and non-selective programs, in order to make secondary schools more appealing to parents and students.

This strategy has revitalized the public sector and appears to have slowed the exodus. Nonetheless, the private sector still remains the first choice among a great number of parents, who still believe that private schools offer better education, support, environment and teachers.

- ***Adjusting To Parental Demand***

When choosing a secondary school for their children, a considerable number of Québec parents opt for private schools because, they say, of the quality education and excellent support offered. Until very recently, their choice was also influenced by the offer of a wider range of attractive programs (such as international studies and enriched programs) found in private schools; a manoeuvrability that had yet to exist in public schools and which could count on a student population specifically tailored for these programs. Consequently, to further attract parents, public secondary schools have chosen to diversify the offer of education under the rubric of special school projects applicable to a given group of students.

This new dynamic of competition to attract both students and their parents has, to be sure, contributed in improving the offer of education in secondary schools, particularly in urban areas. In semi-urban or rural areas, this competitive pressure is less pronounced, but the demand of parents remains nonetheless and is often challenging to meet due to an insufficient number of students. However, is this diversification of schools and programs more a direct result of competition than a firm will to better meet the varied needs and interests of students?

How Is a Diversified Offer of Education Accomplished?

Despite a large number of organizations and education players and information on the subject, it was considerably challenging for the Conseil to draw a complete and detailed picture of schools and special school projects. Indeed, this issue will be addressed in the sections below. The Conseil has chosen the 2004–2005 academic year as the reference year to illustrate the evolution of various projects in both education sectors. The Conseil thus has at its disposal data compiled for one full year.

- ***Schools Dedicated To Special Projects***

In accordance with article 240 of the Education Act, the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports may, in exceptional cases, recognize a school for a specific project. In this case, the entire school is dedicated to the school project. The resulting program offered is thus open to all students in that school, and they are selected from across the school board.

The number of secondary schools with special projects is quite small. During the 2004–2005 reference year, there were only 16 such schools, 5 in the English-speaking sector and 11 in the French-speaking sector:

- 4 international studies program schools
- 5 schools with enriched programs
- 1 language school
- 3 art schools
- 2 alternative schools
- 1 school for dropouts

- ***Special School Projects Applicable To a Group of Students***

In accordance with article 222 of the Education Act, the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports may authorize a departure from the Basic school regulation in order to facilitate the establishment of a special school project applicable to a group of students. In this instance, it should be reiterated that a school may offer one or more special school projects to one or more groups of students, whether students are selected or not. The remainder of the students attend regular classes.

Until recently, ministerial authorization was required whenever there was a departure from subject-time allocation when replacing some subjects. The special school projects that do not require ministerial authorization were considered as local programs or local special school projects. The names of these programs vary greatly from one school to the next.

The Conseil proposes to study the categories of special school projects implemented in secondary schools both public and private, notably international studies programs, sports-study and arts-study programs and other types of special school projects.

A) International Studies Programs

Although the evolution of special school projects is difficult to fully define, it is possible however to determine the sharp increase in the number of schools that offer international studies programs. To wit, in November 2004, there were 83 secondary schools (mainly public) offering this type of program. In May 2005, an additional 10 schools were added to the list, bringing the number to 93 for 2005-2006. These schools are recognized by the Geneva-based International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) and the Société des établissements du baccalauréat international du Québec (SEBIQ), a Québec-based organization representing schools that offer international studies programs in secondary schools and international baccalaureates in colleges.

B) Sports-Study and Arts-Study Programs

In addition to international studies, there are special school projects offered within arts-study and sports-study programs. Here a distinction must be made between two categories of programs: arts-study and sports-study programs recognized by the Minister, and those called concentrations, which are in fact special school projects that do not require ministerial authorization or approval. The recognized arts-study and sports-study programs must adhere to fairly strict administrative regulations, a brief description of which is found in the box below.

Ministerially recognized sports-study and arts-study programs can be considered as the predecessors to special school projects. They differ from the latter in two ways: first, their establishment takes the form of a partnership between a sports association or artistic institution (music conservatory, dramatic arts school, national dance school, etc.) in order to enable athlete/students or artist/students **duly identified by an external third party** not to sacrifice their studies for the sake of their sport or art, as was the previously the case.

Second, academic performance associated with these programs is not the primary criterion for admission, but rather an asset for the athlete/student or artist/student. In fact, as the time devoted to study is often less, students enrolled in this program should be able to progress academically without too many obstacles. The main admission criterion, therefore, is linked first to artistic or sport performance, and second to academic performance.

As for sports concentration programs, they do not require any official recognition, nor are they intended for athlete/students. In the majority of cases, these are local programs which may have, prior to Bill 73, required a departure from the Basic school regulation (subject-time allocation). These programs are quite popular in Québec both in public and private secondary schools. A school may offer one or several sports-study programs to separate groups of students.

Similarly, alongside arts-study programs that require recognition by the Minister, there are concentration programs for the arts, which are local programs that do not require any ministerial recognition.

C) Other Types of Special School Projects

Some special school projects can be found in other subject areas, such as languages, the sciences, computer science, and enriched multidisciplinary programs. These are all projects established to meet the range of interests shown by secondary school students and their parents. Prior to Bill 73, each one of these programs would be subject to a request for departure from school regulations if there were any changes to the subject-time allocation. These programs enrol a large number of secondary students and the number of programs is increasing, both in the public and private sectors.

An Incomplete Picture

During the 2004–2005 academic year there were 474,082 students attending secondary schools in Québec. A total of 77,320 students reported being enrolled in a special school project; approximately 16% of the entire school population. In other words, 83.6% of students were enrolled in the regular program. This represents a slight drop from 2001–2002.

Number of Students Enrolled in Special School Projects, Based On the MELS 2004–2005 *Déclaration des clientèles*

Recognized Arts-Study	7,747
Arts-Study (Concentration)	5,135
Recognized Sports-Study	2,168
Sports-Study (Concentration)	11,049
International Studies	24,317
Computer Science	2,681
Languages	14,370
Sciences	2,518
Multidisciplinary Projects	4,244
Alternative Projects	3,091
Total	**77,320**

The data used by the Conseil to determine the number of students enrolled in a given special school project should be viewed cautiously. The Conseil has attempted to validate these data in order to verify that they reflect a true picture of the situation and to determine if trends could be projected with regard to establishing the offer of special school projects. Thus, although based on the *Déclaration des clientèles* published by the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, these data have been neither validated nor verified by the appropriate ministerial authorities, who, moreover, advise using these data with caution.

Nonetheless, a more realistic picture of the offer of projects and student enrollment can be drawn beyond the official data. By the most conservative estimates, the rate of participation is more likely to be around 20% rather than 16% and the number of existing projects greater than those officially reported. Some of the reasons schools are not reporting projects and student enrollment—which the Ministère is aware of—include: not receiving authorization to depart from the Basic school regulation; lack of funding allocated to local programs; lack of verification and validation on the part of the Ministère; lack of standardized guidelines on filing the *Déclaration des clientèles* on the various special school projects.

Do Private Schools Contribute to Diversifying the Offer of Education in Secondary Schools?

The Conseil believes that private schools do indeed contribute to diversifying the offer of education, particularly at the secondary level. Private schools primarily provide a choice of school for students. For example, in some urban areas, around 30% of Québec students attend a private secondary school, or one out of three. Also, as noted above, this trend is continuing to grow despite the education reform begun in 1997 and despite public secondary schools actively competing with each other (namely by increasing the number of special school projects and revising student selection practices).

Private education is also a diversifying factor that impacts the public education sector. In fact, in public schools, the offer of special school projects has been expanded considerably in order to better compete with the private sector. For its considerations, the Conseil believes that the question of whether the coexistence of these two sectors indeed serves the variety of the education offer in secondary schools is a relevant one, and does merit examination. Moreover, the Conseil deems that there is opportunity for sharing expertise among the sectors with regard to diversification.

BENEFITS AND RISKS

BENEFITS

Québec's choices in diversifying learning in secondary education have reaped benefits which seem, to a large extent, to have been the result of special school projects:

An improved basic general education: one of the more valuable contributions of special school projects related to enriched programs is an improved basic general education that fosters intellectual and methodological competencies for all students. The curricular revision for secondary schools as part of the education reform also contributes to strengthening these learning requirements.

The recognition and promotion of fields of interest in various learning areas: the increase of special school projects has fostered the emergence and recognition of fields of interest likely to address a school population's most heterogeneous profiles, interests and needs. In fact, a quick overview of the offer in secondary schools shows that special school projects abound in the intellectual, sports, arts, sciences, languages, computer and recreational areas.

A greater number of involved and motivated students: the ties between education and certain fields of student interest have made it possible to boost the latter's motivation and interest, which cannot but have a direct impact on school failures and dropout rates. Due to lack of data to corroborate this impact, all evidence concurs on the benefits of special school projects to motivation and retention.

The creation of engaged and collaborative school teams: teamwork, the personal and professional commitment of teachers and championing a common project also play a role in many successful special school projects.

Greater parent interest and satisfaction: parent satisfaction is on the rise in schools that offer one or more special school projects. Here as elsewhere, parental demand is indeed one of the more decisive factors in developing a diversified offer of education in secondary schools.

More dynamic school boards and secondary schools: these educational institutions have been able to utilize their local manoeuvrability to curb the exodus of their clientele toward the private sector. Although this remains a major issue in urban areas, it raises the question of whether it would not have been even greater had it not been for special school projects in the public sector.

Risks

Quebec's choices in diversifying learning also entail potential risks of disparity, some of which are outlined below:

The fragmentation of a common education: education is increasingly segmented even within the same basic compulsory education, despite the consensus that emerged from the Estates General On Education, whose objective had been to provide a common education until the end of Secondary III. It should be noted that individualized learning paths and special school projects are accessible as of the first year of secondary school. For its part, the Conseil has always maintained that Cycle II is best suited for diversifying learning given its optional subjects and orientation nature.

The exclusion of some youth: student selection and labelling are now done at an earlier stage, that is, in elementary schools; the expectations are also increasingly higher. Student selection is based on academic results or the parents' finances (for example, special school fees, expensive supplies, field trips, travel abroad). Students who are average or below

average are often excluded, as are many students from disadvantaged backgrounds or students who attend school outside urban areas. In addition, schools in rural areas very often do not have the sufficient student population to offer a range of special school projects.

The skimming of regular classrooms: by removing top-performing students from a regular classroom, the other students can at times be deprived of one of the better adapted groups, often resulting in more behavioural problems, less time devoted to learning, and a smaller number of performing students. Research on methods of grouping students concurs on this point: placing students into heterogeneous groups has little impact on the academic progression of better-performing students, yet has a positive influence on weaker students. (Dupriez, 2004)

The unequal onus of integrating students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties: where there are no "top performing" students, the onus of integrating students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties rests entirely on regular classrooms. Given Québec's social choice to integrate students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties, this collective responsibility is being called into question, and for some, represents a lack of social unity. (Tondreau, 2003)

The unfair distribution of teachers' workloads: teachers in regular classrooms see their work increasing, and this creates a disparity among educators themselves. Some teachers have students who are motivated and perform well, while others find themselves in classrooms full of at-risk students or students with difficulties, with insufficient resources to meet needs.[1]

Competition among public schools: the public school network has been drawn into a marketplace mentality, and because funding is contingent on enrollment numbers, competition is rapidly taking over. Terms such clients and sale of educational products are now part of secondary school language, both in the private and public sectors.

1 It is worth noting a recent agreement in principle with teachers for an additional $100 million over a three-year period, allocated for hiring 600 new secondary school resource-teacher positions as well as additional support staff for students with difficulties.

KEY CONTEXTUAL ELEMENTS

Selection and Special School Projects

Student selection is not mandatory, neither in a school dedicated to a special school project nor for a special school project applicable to a given group of students. These practices can be established by the school board, or a public or private school. Where student selection processes are in place it is either because the special school project requires less time allocated to learning and a faster pace of student progression, or because the project is built around a specific artistic or athletic ability. While some schools do not opt for student selection and open the project to the entire school community, others base their selection solely on academic results; others still add or replace criteria such as student motivation or interests.

In Quebec there are no set guidelines for student selection. Nonetheless, an increase in student selection, both in public and private schools, has been observed, linked to geographical location, the school's appeal and reputation, and the presence of any competition. According to many school administrators, strict student selection is done only in a select few private schools in large urban areas.

The same conditions apply for selection for special school projects in public schools: the reputation of the program, the balance of the offer and demand, competition with other special projects, location, and so forth. Schools dedicated to a special project typically select their students from across the school board.

Ministerial Directions for Integrating At-Risk Students and Students with Handicaps, Social Maladjustments or Learning Difficulties

In the present Brief, the Conseil illustrates that ministerial directions for integrating at-risk students, students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties are an influential factor in school heterogeneity.

Quebec's choice to integrate at-risk students in regular classrooms dates back to the late 1970s. This social choice was reaffirmed by the Commission For the Estates General On Education and again by the education reform. The latter is currently being implemented in secondary schools, notably by: amending the Education Act; the Policy on Special Education and the reference framework for complementary educational services; the revision of the curriculum, programs of studies and evaluation of learning; and a range of pedagogical measures aimed at supporting success for all students (namely differentiated learning).

In 2005–2006, approximately 958,000 students attended elementary and secondary schools in Québec, and about 16% of them were identified as either handicapped or with social maladjustments or learning difficulties.[2]

The Ministère thus recommended the education community invest in the education reform and pedagogical measures that accompany it to meet the needs of at-risk students and succeed in mainstreaming them, including: early intervention as of preschool, a cycle approach beginning at the elementary level, revising and upgrading the curriculum, competency-based programs of studies (both subject-related and cross-curricular), teamwork and collaboration among teachers and professional staff, and an integrated evaluation of learning.

The Education Reform

In 2003, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation released the Brief *L'appropriation locale de la réforme : un défi à la mesure de l'école secondaire* (CSE, 2003).[3] In this brief, the Conseil endorsed the directions and objectives of the education reform but not without having identified certain obstacles, as well as favourable conditions for successfully implementing this important educational program.

In this brief, which remains relevant today (as the implementation of the education reform in secondary schools only began in September 2005), the Conseil illustrated the breadth of the reform and the extent to which it is characterized by diversity, adaptation and flexibility, all features designed to meet the gamut of student needs. In other words, the educational directions promoted within the education reform could prove to be useful tools to address heterogeneity, both in the classroom and in the entire school.

> The Conseil deems that, despite the challenges of its implementation in secondary schools, the *education reform* is a solid foundation upon which to diversify learning. The cornerstones and directions of the reform remain valid today, even if some measures, notably those linked to differentiated learning, competency-based approaches, the creation of school teams and the revised evaluation of learning practices, all require time before bearing results. This approach presupposes, however, that teachers receive the necessary support and guidance and that administrators fully assume their leadership in education.

2 Data taken from a brochure, *L'adaptation scolaire : portrait de la situation*, published by the Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec for a conference held in May 2006 on special education entitled "Réussir à travers nos différences."

3 An abridged English version of this brief, *Taking Ownership of the Reform: The Challenge for Secondary Schools*, is available from the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, Québec: Le Conseil, 2003.

DECENTRALISATION TOWARD LOCAL POWERS AND THE FRAMEWORK OF BILL 73

The current decentralisation in the education sector is part of a larger trend founded on decades of research on success factors associated with school culture ("School Effects," "School Matters") and the significant value of the teacher-student relationship on learning.

The transfer of educational powers gives the school (primarily school administrators) control over educational measures most likely to favourably influence the realisation of its mission: the educational project, success plan, application of the Basic school regulation, local programs of studies, and teaching material.

This decentralisation comes with a potential risk of disparity. On the one hand, increased local autonomy and manoeuvrability foster the establishment of measures adapted to the needs of each community to realise the mission of education. On the other, this local appropriation may become a source of inequality among communities if compensatory measures (such as additional funding) are not planned for or well defined.

With Bill 73, the responsibility to authorize a departure from the Basic school regulation in special school projects recognized in accordance with article 222 of the Education Act was devolved from the Minister to the school board or private school. This new local decision-making power is governed by ministerial regulation establishing the guidelines for departures. The Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports, however, retains his authority with regard to recognized Sports/Study programs and Arts/Study programs, because they involve financial impact and inter-ministerial agreements.

This new local power should accelerate decision-making by submitting requests for departures to the school board. For their part, as private schools do not have such an intermediary, they are responsible both for the request and the authorization of the departure from the Basic school regulation.

If Bill 73 and its regulation on application place the desired decentralization within the education reform and in the management of the education offer, the Conseil believes there is indeed a risk of potential disparity if the Government does not provide clearer guidelines for the assessment of the goals of democracy and equal opportunity promoted throughout the education system.

The Education Players' Perspective

The issue of diversifying learning in secondary education is a sensitive one, for it is founded on different values and notions of what constitutes a just society and an equitable and unified education system. Therefore, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation deemed it practical to seek the perspective of primary education players by canvassing their official opinions in a consultation paper. In all, of 64 Québec-wide education associations contacted by the Conseil, 39 of them filed a memorandum; a response rate of 59%.

Summary of Findings

The organizations consulted showed great interest in the issue of diversifying learning, as the percentage and quality of the memoranda revealed.

Almost all players consulted welcomed the opportunity given to reflect on this issue. The Conseil noted a feeling of concern and urgency among several players.

With the exception of the private sector, the Conseil noted a fairly wide consensus on the questions outlined in the consultation paper, and an equally clear agreement on the importance of preserving special school projects and making them more accessible to a greater number of students. In general, education players seem to want the best of both worlds: special school projects that are neither inequitable nor exclusive.

Student selection was perceived as the main problem linked to potential risks of disparity in diversifying learning in secondary education.

Eight themes were studied by the Conseil in its considerations:

- education as a common versus individual good;
- the autonomy of local institutional powers and the growth of a marketplace mentality;
- the culture of integrating diversity and the social role of education;
- compulsory instruction and educating the school elite;
- student selection;
- secondary school and its heterogeneity;
- the missions of public and private education and competition;
- current issues and challenges.

EDUCATION AS A COMMON VERSUS INDIVIDUAL GOOD

While recognizing that education is a fundamental individual right, as stipulated in article 1 of the Education Act, the Conseil reiterated in its consultation paper that education is a common good which enables students to become active and responsible citizens in the flourishing and well-being of society. The Conseil also emphasized that education is now increasingly perceived as an individual good, and cited as an example terms that secondary schools now borrow from business when offering educational products that closely reflect parental demand.

Questions asked:

- What strategies are parents pursuing?
- What is the impact of some individual choices on the goals of democracy, accessibility and equal opportunity throughout the education system?

Players' perspectives:

The theme of education as a common versus individual good as well as the strategies pursued by Québec parents elicited many commentaries from the organizations consulted. The concept of education seen as an individual good provoked the most reactions by the fact of closely associating it with the rise of consumerism among not only Québec parents, but among education players as well. Lastly, many respondents proposed solutions to ensure equal opportunity.

THE AUTONOMY OF LOCAL INSTITUTIONAL POWERS AND THE GROWTH OF A MARKETPLACE MENTALITY

Devolving certain responsibilities to the local level is not without any impact on the balance of the offer of education throughout Québec. In its consultation paper, the Conseil reiterated that the increase in competition between schools was not new to the current equilibrium of powers.

Questions asked:

- What is the impact of this competition?
- Should there be any regulatory framework governing the offer of education?

Players' perspectives:

The theme of competition among schools drew a wide number of responses. Twice as many respondents had a negative opinion about competition. While administrators and private school associations did not perceive any negative impacts, university research centres, unions and parents' groups believed that competition may lead to disparity that would require regulation.

The majority of organizations recognized the presence of a marketplace mentality and believed that this has had a negative impact. They were largely in favour of establishing regulatory measures, but were divided over limiting or broadening institutional autonomy.

The Culture of Integrating Diversity and the Social Role of Education

In its consultation paper, the Conseil reiterated that the mission of education is to socialize students and that mainstreaming at-risk students was at the heart of the education reform. The Conseil also emphasized that it is the school's responsibility to ensure the mainstreaming and integration of immigrant students, and students from cultural minorities, as well as undertake the francization of allophones.

Question asked:

- Do our choices in diversifying learning promote this integration?

Players' perspectives:

Several associations believed that at-risk students or students with difficulties would greatly benefit from special school projects which often seem to be inaccessible. Administrators' associations were more inclined to think in terms of implementing the education reform and differentiated learning measures for the integration of students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties.

Unions and university research centres were the most critical of the social role of school, which could be put at risk by the choices in diversifying learning in secondary education.

The private education sector emphasized its contribution to integrating immigrants and highlighted the limitations of mainstreaming at-risk students and students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties in schools.

Compulsory Instruction and Educating the School Elite

Here the Conseil observed that the fact of emphasizing a link between the risk of potential disparity and the boom in special school projects was perceived by some as an attack on the elite. The Conseil moreover questioned the wisdom of educating the elite during the course of compulsory basic education.

Questions asked:

- How do you define the concept of "elite"?
- Is there room for educating the elite during compulsory basic education?

Players' perspectives:

For the majority of respondents, the concept of elite was not universal.

Administrators' associations, both in the public and private sectors, viewed the concept of educating an elite group of students in compulsory education in a positive light.

Unions and university research centres were in favour of a common stream of learning for the longest time possible and "some" diversification in Secondary Cycle II.

Private school associations urged that a distinction be made between a "school for the elite" and an "elite program."

STUDENT SELECTION

In this theme, the Conseil reiterated that a certain number of secondary schools, both public and private, were using student selection for given special school projects.

Questions asked:

- What is the purpose of this selection?
- Does student selection create any problems and if so, what are they?

Players' perspectives:

The issue of student selection is another theme that elicited much response from the organizations consulted. Both in the public and private sectors, there was an attempt to present the objectives linked to student selection in the most socially favourable light.

There seemed to be a fairly wide consensus for making the student's best interests the primary selection criterion for a special school project.

With the exception of organizations in the private sector, there was an agreement on the drawbacks of student selection.

And lastly, the university community was concerned with the widening gulf between social classes and saw a correlation between the concentration of average and below-average students and the emergence of a two-tier school, if not a two-tier education system.

SECONDARY SCHOOL AND ITS HETEROGENEITY

In its consultation paper, the Conseil emphasized that one of the inherent characteristics of today's secondary schools is their heterogeneity. These schools have students with different needs and different profiles. Moreover, methods of grouping students (whether homogenous or heterogeneous) have a direct impact on the performance of weaker students, as many empirical studies demonstrate.

Questions asked:

In secondary schools, does the risk associated with foregoing heterogeneity (by grouping students around a special school project or in individualized learning paths) have an impact:

- On the classroom and school environment?
- On education's mission of integration?
- On success for all students?

Players' perspectives:

Teachers, namely those teaching subject areas linked to special school projects, viewed homogenous groups in a favourable light; so did the private sector.

Administrators were more divided on this question and more concerned with school environment, class management and teachers' workloads.

Unions and the university community were more in favour of heterogeneity, both in school and in the classroom.

THE MISSIONS OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EDUCATION AND COMPETITION

In this theme, the Conseil reiterated that the competition in which both public and private schools are engaged explains, in large part, Québec's choices in diversification, namely by establishing special school projects.

Questions asked:

- What is the mission of public secondary education with regard to diversifying learning?
- What is the mission of private secondary education with regard to diversifying learning?

Players' perspectives:
For the respondents, the missions of both sectors were the same, albeit with different restrictions. In addition to similar missions, many groups hoped that the private sector would have the same obligations and restrictions as the public sector. Otherwise, some groups feel that there should be a considerable increase in support for public schools.

While some players were of the opinion that the private sector represented a positive model, others believed the notion that private schools are better should be demystified.

Private school groups emphasized that private education is not unique in its kind.

Some organizations recommended reviewing funding to private schools.

CURRENT ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Questions asked:

- What are the key issues and challenges confronting diversifying learning in secondary education?
- Do our choices to diversify learning in secondary education advance the goals of democracy and equal opportunity?
- If so, what are the favourable conditions to achieve this?

Players' perspectives:
Teachers' associations expressed concern with what the future holds for students who attend regular classes tailored for the greater benefit of gifted or at-risk students.

Unions believed that our choices to diversify learning are the very antithesis of open and democratic schools.

The private school sector deemed that diversity must be applied to many levels and not to conflate diversification with differentiation.

The university community was of the opinion that the system is breaking away from the fundamental principles that have been the cornerstones of our education system since the Parent Report.

The Anglophone sector and parents' associations urged to build on the "local" aspect, the educational project and the implementation of the education reform to promote the goals of a democratic system.

What the Conseil Retained from the Consultation

The Conseil noted that numerous respondents agreed on many points. Education should be considered a public good that must be safeguarded. The autonomy of local education players and the major role the school plays in managing the offer of education were reaffirmed (while still recognizing the need for regulation). School is an inclusive and pluralistic institution, and school integration remains a viable societal choice provided that sufficient resources are allocated in the system. Top performers can be educated through compulsory basic education and within a common curriculum. Student selection will have a long-term negative impact on the education system. The heterogeneous nature of secondary education, both in school and the classroom, is an asset and not an obstacle to success for a greater number of students. While the missions of both public and private education are similar, the restrictions are different and there is opportunity for sharing expertise between the two networks. Lastly, fairness for all secondary students is fundamental.

FOUR DIRECTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

The Conseil superieur de l'education will herewith formulate four directions that could promote access to special school projects for a greater number of students, ensure heterogeneity both in the school and in the classroom, enable the creation of a more complementary offer of education between the public and private sectors and, ultimately lead to success for a greater number of students.

First Direction:

To Strive For a Diversified and Accessible Offer of Education To All Students Who May Request It

The Conseil invites all local education players to align their institutional choices in diversifying learning with the needs and interests of all students, be they average, at-risk, with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties, or top performers. This presupposes from the outset the adoption of a common vision for special school projects applicable to a group of students. It also entails making these projects accessible to a greater number of students. To do so, the Conseil urges all players to invest in the diversification measures found in the education reform, notably the new curriculum for secondary education.

For the Conseil this direction comprises one fundamental issue of the present Brief: *a common and equitable quality education*. How do we ensure that special school projects do not deviate from the general education provided to all students? How can these projects be made accessible to any student requesting them and what provisions are there in the education reform to this effect?

In the opinion of the Conseil, special school projects should not be undertaken to the detriment of general education, nor should they have any segregating effect. They are designed primarily to meet the needs and interests of youth with different profiles. They foster school motivation, retention and the exploration of new areas of knowledge. They also enable students to test special skills in different fields, and allow some to embark on new fields of interest. In addition, special school projects aim to recruit and retain a greater number of students, to place schools among the best and to create stable groupings of students. Thus it is important that local education players adopt a common vision of special school projects and adhere to the same goals.

Second Direction:
To Support the Local Management and Regulation of the Offer of Special School Projects

The Conseil acknowledges the pivotal role that schools play in managing the offer of education and relies on the resolve of local players to strengthen social unity. This presupposes recognizing their local autonomy and, where needed, increasing their manoeuvrability while respecting the values and characteristics of each school community. That being said, it important that local players be held accountable for establishing special school projects for the success of all students, for equal opportunity and access to the different programs.

This second direction encompasses another important issue of the present Brief: *the pivotal role of the local aspect as a component of social cohesion and equitable education*. How can local power establish and manage the offer of special school projects without creating potential disparity and inequality among all students and in the surrounding school community? How can local decisions in diversifying learning be harmonized with the goals of democracy and accessibility throughout the whole system? What is the role of the Government in the area of monitoring and assessment?

For the Conseil, recognizing the local role in managing and regulating the offer of special school projects is consistent with the directions promoted in the education reform. Devolving responsibilities from the Government to the school boards and from the latter to the schools have enabled each school to reveal its own character, which is embodied in its educational project and its success plan.

Third Direction:
To Reaffirm Québec's Choices in Favour of School and Classroom Heterogeneity

The Conseil invites education players to clearly assert their support and commitment to school integration and heterogeneity. This direction is dependent on promoting the wealth of diversity and uniqueness; pursuing the integration of at-risk students and students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties; offering adapted educational services to students duly labelled as gifted; favouring a heterogeneous grouping of students where at-risk youth and a range of academically performing students can learn side by side.

Reaffirming these societal choices means allocating sufficient and equitable resources to accomplish the social mission of secondary education; supporting successful integration experiences and widely disseminating them; training and guiding teachers in addressing and managing heterogeneity; and establishing venues and methods for sharing the professional expertise of different communities.

Behind this direction lies a third important issue: *the heterogeneous nature of secondary education and the classroom*. How does the education reform support this choice of school integration in a regular classroom? Do secondary education and classroom heterogeneity foster the success of students? Can the private education sector contribute more to the integration of at-risk students and students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties?

In the opinion of the Conseil, school and classroom heterogeneity enable teamwork in the spirit of an educational community: the classroom community invests in the development of democracy and its values, a starting point where "citizenship" education can begin.

FOURTH DIRECTION:
To Build On the Complementarity of the Public and Private Education Sectors

The Conseil wishes to draw the attention of the Minister to the need to forge new ties between the public and private education sectors in as yet uncharted areas and methods of collaboration. This direction encompasses a fourth important issue: *the dual and hierarchical nature of the education system.*

The relationship between these two education sectors is not the focus of the present Brief. Rather, this is essentially a political issue which necessitates political decisions.

However, in order to ensure good governance of the education system and to maintain a certain balance in the offer of education and make it more accessible and diversified for all of Québec, the Conseil deems that it is viable for the two sectors to share the same restrictions, to have access to the same resources and to increasingly share their expertise in the fields of school success and education. To this end, the Conseil invites education players from both sectors to begin dialogue, forge new links of complementarity and to draw on their respective management practices as a source of inspiration for local collaboration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation recommends to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports:

1. To assess the offer of special school projects throughout the education system, and to ensure that information on them be made available to secondary students and their parents (namely, the type and number of projects; the number of students involved; their effect on the curriculum, school success and student achievement; their impact on the goals of democracy, accessibility and equal opportunity).

It was considerably challenging for the Conseil to accurately determine the number of special school projects, the number of students involved, and the distinctive features of the various programs offered. It would be valuable if data on these projects were compiled and updated annually, and made available for the benefit of students and parents for whom these programs are intended.

2. To establish a committee comprised of all concerned players to define the role of special school projects and set guidelines for establishing an offer of these projects throughout the education system.

The Conseil proposes to establish a committee to advise the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports on courses of action so that all school players may have a common understanding of special school projects and guide local authorities in establishing an equitable offer of projects that meets the needs of all students.

3. To include in the report stipulated in the regulation for the application of Bill 73 the responsibility of assessing the impact of diversification on the goals of democracy, accessibility and equal opportunity and to give an account of collaborative activities implemented at the local level for harmonizing and ensuring consistency in the offer of education.

The Conseil adds this recommendation following Bill 73 and the regulation of its application recently enacted by the Government. Article 5 of the regulation stipulates that a school board or a private school must provide to the Minister, after having consulted with the administration of the school concerned, an assessment report on any departure from the Basic school regulation stipulated for a special school project. The Conseil believes that it is essential the scope of report be broadened to include the fundamental goals of democracy, accessibility and equal opportunity of the Québec education system, so as to enable the Minister to safeguard their respect and achievement. In addition, the Conseil is of the opinion that school players must also report on their local collaboration for the consistency and harmonization of the offer of special school projects.

4. To publicly affirm that the missions of both the public and private education sectors are similar by drafting a mission statement for the latter and to ensure that it is inscribed in the Act respecting private education.

The Conseil relies in this regard on the responsibility of private schools to carry out their mission while respecting the larger frameworks of the education system, including the education reform, the Basic school regulation, the Regulation respecting teaching licenses, and annual budget regulations. Although it appears that private education does conform, nonetheless the Conseil believes it essential to include this mission in the Act respecting private education so as to make it official and its realization accountable.

5. To establish measures that foster dialogue and forge new links of complementarity among schools in the same education sector, as well as between public and private education sectors, by officially requesting that they collaborate on harmonizing the offer of education, share the responsibility of school integration, and accept students of various educational profiles.

The Conseil is of the opinion that schools in the same sector, as well as those in public and private sectors, would greatly benefit from collaboration on diversifying the offer of special school projects, as well as in other areas of activity. Indeed, the Conseil deems it practical, in the context of the desired diversification, to give full meaning to the concept of complementarity as set out in the Act respecting private education and urges school boards as well as private schools to forge new links of partnership.

6. To study, in collaboration with representatives from the private education sector, means likely to promote a greater participation of private schools in the integration of at-risk students and students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties.

The Conseil acknowledges the coexistence of two education networks, one public and one private, whose missions are to instruct, socialize and qualify students. Thus the Conseil deems that private education schools should also accept a heterogeneous school population and ensure the integration of at-risk students and students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties.

7. To reaffirm and support, both publicly and politically, the social mission and mission of integration of secondary education and to provide the means to fulfil them.

The Conseil is of the opinion that we must be consistent in diversifying learning by articulating favourable conditions for school integration (beyond a certain threshold, integrating at-risk students and students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties in a regular classroom may compromise their success and that of some students) and by providing local education players with the necessary tools to support them in this important mission (revising and easing certain measures, upholding or even broadening the strategy of intervention Agir autrement *or other target programs, and providing sufficient resources). Where there are no socially or educationally heterogeneous schools or classes, the Conseil believes that there should be additional investment and support for secondary schools to fulfil their mandate of integration.*

The Conseil recommends to local education players (school boards, public secondary school governing boards, public and private secondary school administrations, secondary school teams both public and private):

8. To make special school projects accessible to all students who may request them.

The Conseil advocates the accessibility of special school projects to all students who may request them, for it is the programs' main objective to meet the diversified needs and interests of all youth so as to motivate, inspire and enable them to embark on new areas of learning and interest and to test specific skills. This direction presupposes that students are aware of the projects' requirements, and that they receive the proper support for success.

9. To invest in the implementation of the education reform so as to promote the integration of the greatest number of students in special school projects, while respecting Québec's fundamental educational choices.

The Conseil believes that we must stay the course, for a reform of this scope requires time to be fully implemented and assessed on its effectiveness. The Conseil therefore acknowledges that a good number of measures and approaches implemented within the education reform must still be validated for the greater success of all students.

10. To eschew student selection practices based solely on academic performance and to invest in more inclusive criteria, such as student interest and motivation, commitment to the school project, and dedication to studies.

The Conseil believes that student selection practices should be limited during the course of compulsory basic education. Where student selection is required, the Conseil proposes that the criteria not be based solely on academic results.

11. To participate in the establishment of Québec-wide guidelines for special school projects and in harmonizing and unifying the offer of education at the local and regional levels.

The Conseil deems that establishing Québec-wide guidelines should be done in partnership with the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports in the spirit of the educational reform and of the responsibility of the local and regional authorities.

12. To provide services adapted to students duly recognized as "gifted" according to parameters established by the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports.

The Conseil acknowledges that some students achieve excellent academic results and that some special school projects are specifically tailored for them. The Conseil nonetheless calls for a distinction to be made between "good" students and "gifted" students so the latter may not be denied services adapted to their particular needs.

The Conseil recommends specifically to secondary school administrations, parents of public and private secondary school students and their school communities:

13. To promote the implementation of special school projects accessible to all students.

Based on research, the Conseil maintains that class heterogeneity fosters success in weaker students without, however, affecting the progress of top-performing students. Diversity is thus an asset and not an obstacle to success for a greater number of students.

14. To invest in school and community spirit that promotes social and collective values, sharing and unity when establishing the offer of education in their school.

The Conseil invites local school players to adopt a unified approach when deciding on the selective or non-selective nature of special school projects offered in secondary schools.

The Conseil recommends to public and private secondary education teachers:

15. To develop or strengthen their competencies in managing heterogeneity, both in the school and in the classroom.

The Conseil invites practicing teachers to place this priority at the heart of their individual and collective ongoing training.

The Conseil recommends to universities:

16. To focus on the development of competencies related to managing school heterogeneity in their basic training programs for future secondary school teachers, as well as upgrading programs for practicing teachers.

The Conseil deems that basic training programs of future secondary school teachers must include management of and approaches to heterogeneity in the school and in the classroom. The heterogeneous nature of the school population is inherent to secondary education and it is important to adequately enable those called upon to develop this asset. In addition, the Conseil is of the opinion that universities should establish ongoing training programs for secondary school teachers.

CONCLUSION

Diversifying learning in secondary education is taking the form of special school projects applicable to a given group of students. As the Conseil has shown, this avenue has had certain benefits: an improved basic general education; the recognition and promotion of personal skills in various areas of learning; a greater number of involved and motivated students; the establishment of driven and collaborative school teams; more interested and satisfied parents in secondary education; more dynamic schools and school boards.

Despite these positive results, the choice to diversify learning through the offer of special school projects is not without the potential risk of disparity: the fragmentation of a common education; the exclusion of certain youth; the skimming of regular classrooms; the unequal onus in the integration of at-risk students and students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties; the unfair workload for teachers; and competition among public schools are just some of the challenges noted by the Conseil.

In conclusion, the Conseil has defined the directions that should promote access for a greater number of students to special school projects; ensure heterogeneity in secondary schools and in classrooms; produce a more complementary offer of education between the public and private sectors; and ultimately lead to success for a greater number of students.

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